



Continued from Friday

"Two left about! Gallop!" The orders shot out like the shots from a machine gun; almost before he knew it the major found himself galloping back to the little camp.

"Have twenty men saddle up at once, sergeant!" cried Kynaston. "Take nothing but canteens, rifles, and a hundred rounds of ammunition per man. Get the men ready at once."

The sergeant hesitated and finally ventured on a liberty that was rare indeed for him.

"Sir, is the lieutenant going to cross the line?" he asked. "Do you remember, sir, what the orders are? It'll cost the lieutenant his commission."

"If it'll cost my commission to help a couple of American ladies who are in trouble—then I'll have to pay the price, sergeant. Hurry up! Tell that old priest to come over to my tent at once."

Joyfully the grizzled soldier departed. Soon his men were scurrying

about among the tents. While stuffing his belt full of cartridges Kynaston was interrupted by an eager orderly.

"Sir, the major presents his compliments and says that the lieutenant had better turn over to him any valuables that he has in camp, if he is going to leave for any length of time."

Kynaston gasped. In the thought of seeing Mrs. Fane again he had forgotten the saddlebags and the jewel. He dashed across the tent, seized the saddlebags, and hurried to the tent that had been pitched for the major.

"Here it is, sir. I'm glad you thought of it. I'd have gone and left it on the floor of my tent if it had not been for you. Here it is—"

He unbuckled the bags and turned out upon the little camp-table the unsavory mass of dirty oiled rags that he had so curiously unwrapped a few hours before.

"I'd have been in a nice mess," he said frankly, "if I'd left this here and someone had walked off with it. Good thing for me that you're here, sir. I can leave it here with you till I return. What is it, trumpeter?"

For a disheveled and excited trumpeter had thrust his way into the tent.

"Sir, Sergeant Black has directed me to inform the troop commander that the old padre has left the camp. The sentry on the picket line says he seen him pull his freight out on the trail that leads up on the mesa just after the lieutenant and the major went out of camp an hour ago."

Kynaston, his brow wrinkled with astonishment, picked the bunch of rags to pieces.

Then he began frenziedly to turn over the saddlebags. Finally turning them inside out he threw bags and rags upon the blanket-covered table and leaned forward with whitened face.

"The Bell is gone!" he said in a voice that shook with anger and mortification. "The Bell is gone!"

CHAPTER IV.

Across the Line.

A long silence fell. Kynaston was the first to break it.

"Sergeant," he said quickly, "send two men to round up that old priest. He cannot have got very far, for he is blind and could not see his road. Stay after him till you get him and then bring him back here to me."

"I want a few words with him," he added grimly.

"Isn't this a sweet mess?" he said, turning to Major Updyke.

The older officer nodded.

"Kynaston," he said presently,

"take my advice and send a wire at once to department headquarters reporting the loss of the stone. It's too valuable a thing to leave to chance. Don't you see that when those prisoners of yours discover that it has been lost they'll put up an awful howl? Then if any investigation is made, it'll only show that you had the stone in your possession, and that you declined to turn it over to the priest. The papers'll make capital of it, and you'll achieve a very undesirable notoriety. Report the matter at once. If you'll write out a wire I'll send it for you. When will you be back?"

"In three hours at most, sir, I think. I can't thank you enough, sir, for the interest you have taken. Here's the message, sir."

He scribbled a curt message and swung into saddle.

"Good-by, major! I'll be back in a little while. Adios, sir. Right by two! Trot, march! Route order!"

And the little squad of excited cavalrymen moved quickly off up the road.

After Kynaston left him Major Updyke sat deep in thought for some time. He was finally roused by a soldier's rapping gently on the tent-pole. "Come!" called the major, and the man stepped inside.

"Sir," he said, "the officer who commanded the prisoners has asked me

to ask the major if he can see him."

"Certainly. Go and tell the sergeant of the guard to send him up here under guard."

The soldier left.

"Now," thought Major Updyke, "I wonder what new devilment is afoot?"

A moment later the Mexican captain of infantry entered the tent and introduced himself as El Capitan Ygnacio Torres.

"I have asked for the honor of an interview, senior, because I am sure that the Americans do not desire to lend themselves to a piece of injustice. I refer, senior, to the taking of our stores. The arms, of course, I understand are to be held until the cessation of hostilities, as is required by international law, but the other things—the money and our personal belongings—are not these respected as in war?"

"What personal belongings do you mean, sir?"

"I mean, sir, that there was on one of these pack-mules a very valuable jewel that we took from the rebels in fight. They had stolen it from the Shrine of Our Lady of Olvidados, down in Trocanto to the south, and were bringing it north to purchase arms with. We fought with them and took the plunder, and I wish now to enter formal claim for it."

"Who was the blind priest who came into camp yesterday and claimed it?" asked Major Updyke.

"A blind priest, senior? I know only that a man came and claimed the stone—the Bell, I mean. I am told that he came hard into camp upon the arrival of the prisoners. I know that he claims the stone as a part of the property of his shrine down in Yucatan; but, senior, that is a claim that might well be made by any man who has seen or

heard of the jewel. Has he seen it?"

"Not since its arrival here, certainly."

"Can he describe it?"

Major Updyke laughed. "It is hardly to be expected, senior, that a blind man can so accurately describe such a thing as to convince anyone. He has certainly heard someone else describe it, at least."

"I ask," insisted the Mexican, "that he be questioned in my presence as to how and where and why the stone came into our possession. It is true that the stone was looted from the south by the rebels. It is also true that we defeated them in open fight and that they fled, leaving their pack-mules."

"These mules we captured, and afterward were compelled to abandon when the rebels had received reinforcements and drove us across the border. Then, senior, your lieutenant held us as prisoners of war and took our baggage."

"I ask this, senior, because one of my men has told that he saw the blind priest leave the camp a short time ago. I know him well enough to know that if he has left a good bed and good meals he must have had sound reason. May I see the stone, senior, to be assured of its safety?"

Major Updyke hesitated. A refusal of the request, which was but reasonable, would certainly create suspicions of Kynaston's honesty. A statement of the actual condition of affairs would not be believed. He temporized.

"Senior Kynaston turned over the saddlebags to me a while ago," he said. "I think it would be better to wait until he returns."

"But, senior," persisted the Mexican, "did you see the Bell? It is a wonderful stone?" Did you see it?"

"No, I have not seen it; in fact, senior, to be perfectly frank with you, when Senior Kynaston sent for the padre to speak to him about the matter of the Bell, the padre had left the camp and the stone was gone."

The Mexican started.

"Senior," he said, "I had feared some such thing. El viejo diablo! I might have known that some such thing would happen if the lieutenant were not warned. Blind as he is, that old rascal can see more with his sightless eyes than many sound men with two. Where is the lieutenant, senior?"

"He, too, has left camp, and he has sent a party to arrest the padre wherever they shall find him. Rest content, senior, the jewel will be recovered, and when it is recovered it will not again be placed in jeopardy. Will you not sit down and have a cigar? I can guarantee them. They come from your own state of Tamaulipas."

In the meantime Kynaston, with his men, had pushed on across the range, from which he had seen, earlier in the evening, the flames that told him of the attack upon the Santa Cruz mine. The mine lay a long three miles across the border; but though well he knew that under the existing orders

he had no business across the line, yet he pushed on without hesitation.

Mile after mile they put behind them as a carpenter throws shavings behind him. Finally they paused on a little declivity looking down toward the great sweep of the range, on the farther slope of which stood the minehouses.

"You stay here, sergeant, with the rest of the detachment, on the American side. I will cross over, and if I find I need you I shall start a fire."



Mile After Mile They Put Behind Them.

You can see it for ten miles. If you see a fire show three times, come right into Mexico with all the men. I shall take one man with me.

"It is just possible that we may be able to help the people without getting ourselves into trouble. In any case, we must not get into a row on the wrong side of the line. Be sure to keep a man on the lookout. I shall make two flares if I want you. Nolan, you come with me."

The old soldier would have liked to remonstrate with his officer, but the habits of discipline of twenty years were too strong. He saluted, and, bidding his men dismount and loosen their cinches, watched his young superior and Nolan as they walked their horses down the hill in the growing light.

When they reached the level ground they took up the trot, and presently were out of sight among the scrubby cacti and the mesquit bushes that covered the face of the land.

It was a great risk to take; not that the danger of actual conflict was great,

but there was the certainty that if his interference should become known to the higher authorities Kynaston would have to be offered up as a sacrifice to Mexican complaints.

"We'll move up to that hill just above the minehouse, Nolan, and see what we can from there. There go some more shots. It looks to me as though the place is being attacked from the southern side. If so, we will hide under cover on the range to the north and work down toward the house. We'll hide our horses among the bowlders and scout down afoot."

So, moving very carefully along the bowlder-strewn hillside, they tied their horses to a great mesquit bush that stood in the bottom of an arroyo. Taking their rifles from the scabbards, they picked their way warily up the slope to the summit, a point from which they could plainly see the attack.

The Santa Cruz mine lay some six hundred yards below them. A little cottage built of adobe showed where the superintendent lived, and across from it stood the general store. Behind this again, surrounded in front with adobe walls that marked the corrals where the mine mules were kept, stood the long engine house.

Dark, yawning mouths gaping at them from the hillside showed where the lines of the ore-cars were loaded in the drift, for the Santa Cruz was fortunate above most mines in that it was possible to tunnel straight into the breast of the hill without digging a shaft.

Far below the line of the buildings Kynaston and Nolan, looking down from the vantage-point of their hill, saw in a far hollow a group of riderless horses, with one or two dismounted men guarding them.

"There's their herd. Look, Nolan! Do you see their line?"

Before Nolan could speak the long crack and rattle of rifle fire broke out from the line of great cottonwood trees that marked the bottom of the now dry watercourse.

The bullets whined over the house; some of them kicked up spurts of dust from the adobe walls. An answering shot from the house told that the defenders were wide awake. Kynaston saw the shot take ground on the slope below him.

At once awake to the necessity of finding some way of getting to the house undiscovered, Kynaston scanned the ground in his front carefully.

The hillside where he lay was cut up by many acequias, or little ditches, made by the rains of past years. These little ditches ran straight down the slope toward the house. Where these ran out into the burned alfalfa patches stood the cottages, and beyond this again the corrals and the stables.

Still farther to the south, beyond the lines of the adobe walls, the ground sloped more gently, to a little stream bed bordered with cottonwoods, along which the attacking party had taken up its position.

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